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**The Unapologetic Leader's
Guide to Empowering
Everyone Around You**

FRANCES FREI & ANNE MORRISS

UNLEASHED



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CONTENTS

1. IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU **1**

Leadership is about empowering other people as a result of your presence—and making sure that impact continues into your absence.

PART ONE

PRESENCE

2. TRUST **31**

Trust is the foundation for empowering leadership. You build trust when you reveal empathy, logic, and authenticity.

3. LOVE **59**

You empower other people when you simultaneously set high standards and reveal deep devotion to them.

4. BELONGING **89**

You empower teams when you champion difference and ensure that everyone can contribute their unique capacities and perspectives.

PART TWO

ABSENCE

5. STRATEGY 135

You empower organizations when you show people how to create and capture value on their own.

6. CULTURE 165

You empower communities—organizations and beyond—when you change the way people think and act.

Notes 193

Index 203

Disclosures 209

Acknowledgments 211

About the Authors 213

1

IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

There are *a lot* of books about leadership, many of them terrific. Humans have been dwelling on the practice and mystery of great leadership for millennia (more on that later). Why read one more? Well, if you look around, it's clear that many of the existing models of leadership are not wholly up to the task of handling the challenges we now face together. From rebuilding trust in institutions to unleashing potential at the scale of organizations and beyond, we believe that traditional ideas about leadership only get us so far. They carry us through the first few miles of today's leadership marathon, but often set us up to lose momentum before we get all the way to the finish line of impact.^a

The problem, respectfully, is that it's been all about *you*. Your talents and shortcomings as a leader. Your confidence and lack of it. Your heroic moments of courage and instinct—and, of course, your epic falls from grace. For all kinds of good reasons, including the demands of good storytelling, traditional leadership narratives

a. This is the first of a number of awkward sports analogies.

2 UNLEASHED

assume that the vision-having, strategy-making, troops-rallying leader is the most important person in the scene.

In this book, we propose a different orientation. Our starting point is that leadership, at its core, isn't about you. Instead, it's about how effective you are at empowering *other* people and unleashing *their* full potential. And we will begin by making the case that if you seek to lead, then the important work ahead starts with turning outward.

Consider these questions: Are your teammates and colleagues better off when you're around? Are they more productive and more engaged? More willing to innovate and take smart bets? Whatever your answers are, hold on to them as we begin this conversation. The response we hear most often is "sometimes," and it's the typical pattern we observe among even the most seasoned leaders. Leaders of all backgrounds and tenures only sometimes succeed in creating conditions that allow other people to thrive, and few have full control over the levers of their success. Our mission here is to help you fix that.

Who do we think we are?

We are scholars and writers, coaches and company builders, optimists and (on our best days) accelerators of action. It has been the privilege of our lives to work as change agents at some of the world's most influential organizations—companies like Uber, WeWork and Riot Games—and with some of the world's most inspiring business leaders, people like Jen Morgan at SAP, Doug McMillon at Walmart, and Bozoma Saint John at, well, any room she decides to walk into. But at the core of our identities, we are educators, which is why we wanted to write a book about leadership. We believe that what we've learned in the process of changing things can be useful

to anyone who seeks to lead, particularly now, when the scale and complexity of our shared challenges can seem overwhelming. We believe that our highest duty is to current and future generations of leaders who are willing to put themselves out there and try to build a better world.

We were both taken by the idea of leadership at a curiously young age. Frances first became interested in the context of sports: how coaches helped players reach their potential, how players made *each other* better on and off the court, how the joy and heartbreak of competition seemed to elevate everyone in the game. For Anne, oddly enough, it turned into an obsession with the American Revolution at the delicate age of nine. Side effects included regular appearances as a cross-dressed minuteman and middle-of-the-night reenactments of Paul Revere's ride.^b We were not like the other kids.

In both of these arenas, it was the poetic, often breathtaking acts of leadership that captured our early imagination: Michael Jordan's embodiment of excellence in his dazzling drives to the basket, John Adams's willingness to defend enemy soldiers in court, on principles that would inspire the best version of a new nation. These were people who seemed to defy the limits of their humanity in pursuit of something bigger than themselves. Their example expanded possibilities for anyone paying attention, even centuries later, even for two wide-eyed and slack-jawed little girls who had no real business dreaming of living outsized lives.

We assumed to be a leader meant to "Be Like Mike," which seemed like a highly unlikely prospect. As we both started playing sports ourselves—and starting revolutions, in our own small ways—we discovered leadership was a lot messier (and less beautiful to watch) than we had imagined. It wasn't only about the guy

b. She once woke up her siblings, wild-eyed and *sleepwalking*, with shouts of "the British are coming!"

4 UNLEASHED

flying through the air, but also about—indeed, *primarily* about—what everyone else on the court was doing.

As we went on to study organizations and build them, we discovered that the daily work of leading is much quieter and less dramatic than the leadership stories that had captivated us as children. That kind of work happens in the honest conversation with a colleague who's not meeting your expectations or in the decision to take a chance on someone who's not sure they're ready for the job. It happens in the long walk to your boss's office to tell them that you've looked at the data from every possible angle and their strategy isn't working. The practice of leadership almost always asks you to risk something, but it only sometimes requires a midnight ride or a clutch, buzzer-beating jump shot. And there's rarely a crowd that goes wild when you get it right.

A new definition of leadership

We have dedicated our lives to making leaders and organizations better. Here's the important, intuition-bending leadership principle that this experience has taught us: the real work of leadership isn't particularly concerned with the leader. It isn't so worried about the speechifying person at the front of the room. Whether they're loved or feared. How smart they sound. Whether their rival is becoming too powerful. Yes, those things can end up mattering around the edges, but they are sideshows to leadership's genuine ringmaster. Again, leadership, at its core, isn't about you. It's about how effective you are at unleashing *other people*. Full stop. That's it. That's the secret.

The practical definition of leadership we use in our work is that *leadership is about empowering other people as a result of your presence—and making sure that impact continues into your absence.*¹

Your job as a leader is to create the conditions for the people around you to become increasingly effective, to help them fully realize their own capacity and power. And not only when you're in the trenches with them, but also when you're not around, and even (this is the cleanest test) after you've permanently moved on from the team.

This orientation becomes more important as your leadership mandate grows. When Stacy Brown-Philpot, now the CEO of TaskRabbit (more to come on Brown-Philpot) went from managing a fourteen-person team to ultimately more than a thousand, she realized she had to rethink her approach to leadership.² For context, Brown-Philpot was working at Google at the time, where she was already well known as a strategic, results-oriented leader. She was in the process of rocketing to the top of Sheryl Sandberg's operations organization, pausing to launch the Black Googlers Network along the way. Brown-Philpot had gone to Sandberg with the observation that black professionals were underrepresented at Google—and the conviction that a dedicated effort to recruit, retain, and connect them to each other would make a difference. Sandberg challenged Brown-Philpot to lead the effort herself: “You're it. You're the person that you've been waiting for to do this.”³

Brown-Philpot already was, to use a technical term, a rock star. And yet she found herself walking out of meetings with her direct reports, incredibly frustrated. The way she tells the story, she would show up with her own agenda—a list of the “ten things” she wanted to accomplish—and after only getting through one of them in the course of the meeting, she would code the interaction a leadership failure. Her breakthrough came when she reframed her purpose: “What I needed to learn . . . was that this meeting is not about you, Stacy. This meeting is about the person that you're leading.”⁴ As Brown-Philpot describes it, she shifted her focus going forward from what *she* needed to be successful as a leader to what she needed to do to help *others* succeed. This reframing has powered her to the